



# God's Omnipotence: A Literary Investigation

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## Abstract

The omnipotence of God can be defined as the perfect ability of God to do all things that are consistent with the divine character. Open theists see God as one who is influenced as God interacts with human beings in time and space (temporally). Thus, for Open Theists, God is affected and influenced by the world. This paper revisits the historical, biblical and theological grounds for the doctrine of omnipotence with the aim of re-establishing the relevance of divine omnipotence. Using a literary investigation this article traces the developments of the doctrine of God's power from the Early Church Fathers to the Reformers to establish whether the articulation of God's power within Open Theism resonates with Orthodox Theology and Evangelicalism.

**Keywords:** God, Omnipotence, Open Theist, Orthodoxy, Evangelicalism.

## Introduction

The omnipotence of God can be defined as the perfect ability of God to do all things that are consistent with the divine character. Bavinck (1977:243) defines omnipotence as God's absolute power; as God's ability to do whatever is in harmony with all of God's perfections and God's ordinate power; as God's ability to perform whatever God decrees. While open theists do not directly deny the omnipotence of God, by default this divine attribute is undermined because of the attack on omniscience and God's immutability. Whitehead (1978) views God as "dipolar". He sees God as one who is influenced but also one who can be persuaded. Because God interacts with human beings in time and space (temporally), they influence God. Thus, for the process theologian God is affected and influenced by the world. Therefore, process theologians redefine God's omnipotence in terms of persuasion or influence in the overall world process. Oord (2019) in his book *God Can't*, describes God's nature as one of love and love does not control, then any intervention by the divine to override evil once and for all would be contradictory to God's nature. Moreover, this action would conflict with human freedom. Since authentic love never controls, God must work alongside constantly changing factors, agents, and causes rather than exert force over them to produce specific outcomes. God is seen as one agent among many in the world and has as much power as any agent. This power is not absolute but limited persuasive or passive power.

The greatness of God's power is ground for religious praise. In such praise the Christian regards God's power as an absolute, the very standard of power. To attribute weakness to God is incompatible with Evangelicalism and the stance of worship. Omnipotence is inseparable from God's omniscience (Harold, 2019) and God's immutability (Harold, 2021). Another important reason to understand the doctrine of Omnipotence is its relationship with the problem of evil. This article will undertake a historical and literary investigation of the Early



Church Fathers and their understanding of God's omnipotence. This study attempts to show that the view of an all-powerful God held by the Church Fathers still resonates within the Evangelical tradition and that the problem of evil does not cause a barrier to our understanding of God's omnipotence. However, this understanding needs to be clarified by the acknowledgement that omnipotence does not mean that God can do anything. Origen in *First Principle* (ANF 4:346) articulates this clearly that "nothing is impossible for the Omnipotent," warning to take this too far will lead to affirm some absurd things about God. Origen in *Against Celsus*, (ANF Vol 4:492, 553) explains that "God can do everything which it is possible for him to do without ceasing to be God, and good, and wise. . . . [S]o neither is God able to commit wickedness, for the power of doing evil is contrary to his deity and omnipotence. Thus we do not back ourselves into a most absurd corner, saying that with God *all* things are possible."

- God cannot do anything logically impossible.
- God cannot do anything that contradicts the Godself nature.
- God cannot make decisions that limit the possibilities of what God can do.

These so called "limitations" of God's power do not delimit God but rather enable the Christian to have even more confidence in the constancy of God.

## **Evidence from the Church Fathers to Reformers on God's Omnipotence**

### **Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE)**

Clement argues against the foolishness and absurdity of images by which gods are worshipped because he sees this as the worship of the products of human hands. These products are made because human beings choose disbelief in God and a licentious rather than restrained lifestyle. Clement compares human art with the power of God. Clement in *Exhortation to the Heathens* (ANF Vol.2. 185-190) states: "How great is the power of God! His bare volition was the creation of the universe. For God alone made it, because he is truly God. The mere willing was followed by the spring into being that he willed". In this statement Clement reflects on the power of God as God's perfect ability to do all things consistent with the divine nature. God can do God wills to do, and God's power is not limited to the influence of this temporal world. God's power works according to the divine will. Thus, for Clement God's power is expressed in the Godself will. As a result, Clement sees God exercising influence everywhere and overall in such a way as to empower and enable the freedom of other things. The extent of this influence is called omnipotence. Thus, for Clement God's omnipotence means that there is nothing that God cannot do.

### **Origen (184 – 253 CE)**

Origen, in articulating a defence against Celcus's understanding of the nature and power of God, states (in *Against Celcus* in ANF Vol. IV:553) that God possesses not only the power but the will to act– but that God cannot do anything contrary to reason or contrary to the divine nature. Origen defines God as good, just and omnipotent. God is eternal, invisible and incorporeal. But by definition his/her qualities are not absolute; he/she cannot act out *any* action since his actions are limited to absolute goodness, justice and wisdom. Origen views God as having natural limitations: for example, God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2), and God cannot tempt anyone to sin (Jam. 1:13). But this by no means interferes with God's omnipotence.



### Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE)

St. Augustine also understands God's omnipotence as God's being able to do anything that is not in contradiction to his/her own nature. St. Augustine (in *City of God* 5.10 in *NPNF* Vol. II: 92-93) states: "For God is called omnipotent on account of his doing what he wills, not on account of his suffering what he wills not; for if that should befall him, he would by no means be omnipotent. Wherefore, he cannot do some things for the very reason that he is omnipotent." This by no means diminishes God's power because God cannot contradict Godself, God cannot die or sin. If God were able to sin, then God could not be described as omnipotent. St. Augustine (in *City of God* 5.10, *NPNF* Vol. II:92-93) also states that God is omnipotent based on that which God wills, and not on that which God does not will. According to St. Augustine, this is because the will/knowledge of God God's consists of all the decisions creatures will make. However, this power is not always coercive, thereby honouring human freedom.

### Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE)

Aquinas discusses divine omnipotence in a number of places. The following remarks will be based principally on *Summa Theologica*, Question 25<sup>1</sup>, which answers whether there is power in God. Aquinas notes six sub questions:

- Whether there is power in God
- Whether God's power is infinite;
- Whether God's is omnipotent;
- Whether God's can make the past not to have been;
- Whether God's can do what he/she has not done or do away with what he/she has done;
- Whether God can make better what God has already made.

In answering the first question Aquinas<sup>2</sup> states that active, not passive, power is found in God and God's power is infinite and unrestricted. If God performs any act is a pure act. Therefore, active power belongs to God preeminently in the highest degree. Aquinas like St. Augustine makes no distinction between the power of God and the will of God because that God's active power is God's perfection. The second question argues: Active power is found in God because he/she is a perfect act. God is perfect and unlimited. God's power is the same as God's nature therefore infinite.

In answering the third question on the omnipotence of God, Aquinas asks if God is omnipotent. If God can do anything, what is the meaning of "anything"? The correlative of power (*potentia*) is the possible and anything that can possibly be or be done falls within the scope of the divine power that does not contradict his/her nature. Aquinas<sup>3</sup> state:

It must, however, be remembered that since every agent produces an effect like itself, to each active power there corresponds a thing possible as its proper object according to the nature of that act on which its active power is founded; for instance, the power of giving warmth is related as to its proper object to the being capable of being warmed. The divine existence, however, upon which the nature of power in God is founded, is infinite, and is not limited to any genus of being; but possesses within itself the perfection of all being. Whence, whatsoever has or can have the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1025.htm>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*



nature of being, is numbered among the absolutely possible things, in respect of which God is called omnipotent

God's power relates to a possible *absolute*, i.e. that which is possible without qualification. Therefore, for Aquinas there is nothing impossible for God.

### **Martin Luther (1483 –1546 CE)**

Luther was unflinching in his recognition that divine omnipotence implied that God was the original cause of all things and actions, including the actions of Satan. Luther (1960:145) understanding concerning the omnipotence of God is clear: "God works all in all...God even works what is evil in the impious ... [Judas'] will was the work of God; God by his almighty power moved his will as he does all that is in the world." Luther, therefore, understands all action then is an extension of God's will, including the will of Satan. "Since God moves and does all, we must take it that he moves and acts even in Satan and the godless, evil things are done with God himself setting them in motion." Luther did not believe in the concept that human beings have free will. He (as cited in Kerr, 1966:91) states that a word is not even found in the Scriptures. Thus, Luther believed that human will or free will ceases to exist in God's presence because only God has free will (as cited in Kerr, 1966:88). Such is the power of God that all things are drawn into the accordance of God's will.

The following passage from *The Bondage of the Will* not only continues the point, but shows Luther's (as cited in Kerr, 1966:35) supreme rhetorical skills: "The human will is like a beast of burden. If God mounts it, it wishes and goes as God wills; if Satan mounts it, it wishes and goes as Satan wills. Nor can it choose its rider. The riders contend for its possession." In Luther's reading of divine omnipotence, there is no basis for human autonomy and self-determination. For Luther, what was at stake was divine omnipotence and any amount of self-reliance for salvation takes away from the power and glory of God, and our reliance on God. Thus, for Luther all power and the exercise of all power belongs to God.

Luther is not always philosophically astute, but his (as cited in Kerr, 1966:35) definition of omnipotence contains an important clarification: "By the omnipotence of God I do not mean the potentiality by which he could do many things which he does not, but the active power by which he potently works all in all" Thus, God has no passive power, but has complete active power. The notion of God as some passive source of power is of course totally foreign to Luther. Luther (as cited in Kerr, 1966:29) believed in the "Almighty God Maker of heaven and earth." Luther's understanding of God contradicts the Aristotelian concept of a God who does not have the power to engage and govern the world. For Luther God's will is God's power and nothing can hinder it.

### **John Calvin (1509 – 1564 CE)**

In defining his understanding of God's omnipotence, Calvin disputes the distinction made between the absolute power of God (the set of all possible that God could enact) and the ordained power of God (the subsets of those possible that God decides to act on. Medieval theologians essentially held this distinction to safeguard God transcendence and unknowability while maintaining the fundamental reliability of the created order. Steinmetz (1995:40) quotes the following passage from Calvin's commentary on Isaiah 23 in which he rejects out of hand the scholastic distinction between God's absolute and ordained power: "The invention, which the Schoolmen have introduced, about the absolute power of God, is shocking blasphemy. It is all one as if they said that God is a tyrant who resolves to do what



he pleases, not by justice, but through caprice. Their schools are full of such blasphemies, and are not unlike the heathens, who said that God sports with human affairs.” While Calvin rejected the distinction made, Steinmetz (1995:40-52) argues that it was not with the content that Calvin disagreed with but rather the terminology used to describe God’s power. Calvin’s understanding of God’s power stems from the primacy of divine will in his/her thought.

### **An Evangelical Understanding of Omnipotence**

Evangelicals understand omnipotence to mean “all power”. A biblical synonym is Almighty. Grudem (1994:217) states: “omnipotence means that God is able to do all his/her holy will.” Barth (1957:523) connects the omnipotence the constancy or immutability of God and states that all of God’s perfections are omnipotent. Therefore, he argues that God’s omnipotence is not power without connection, that is power in and of itself is not God, but rather that God is power. Bath understanding of omnipotence therefore is to be understood to be both a *potentia* (a power within possibility) and a *postestas* (an authority or rule), simultaneously and without separation. The criterion for the manifestation of this power does not lie outside of God but in God himself/herself. Therefore Barth (1957: 535-536) argues thus “God cannot do a thing because it is impossible; it is impossible because God cannot do it. The limits of the possible is not self- contradiction....but contradiction of God”

Therefore, to say that God can do all things would be incorrect as God’s power must be interpreted in accordance with God’s own character. God can only do things that are in harmony with his/her character (Thiessen, 1977:82). Thus, there are some things that God cannot do. Frame (2002: 518-520) list six actions that God cannot perform:

- Logically contradictory actions: like making a square circle.
- Immoral actions: God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2, Heb. 6:18) or sin (Hab. 1:13).
- Actions appropriate only to finite creatures: like buying shoes, celebrating birthdays or getting sick.
- Actions denying God’s own nature: like creating another God, abandoning and deny the Godself attributes (2 Tim 2:13).
- God changing eternal plans: God’s eternal plans are unchangeable.
- Making a stone so large that he/she cannot lift it. For God to make a stone so large that he/she cannot lift it means that God must contradict divine omnipotence. There is no contradiction in God.

However, these are not objects of power and therefore do not limit God's power but rather reflect God’s holiness and character. There are two ways that God exercises power; thus, a distinction may be drawn between God’s absolute power and God’s ordinate power. Absolute power means that God may work directly without secondary causes e.g. in creation. The works of providence illustrate the ordinate power whereby God uses secondary causes (Thiessen, 1996:82). In either case, God is exercising divine efficiency.

Evangelicals (Grudem 1994, Erickson 1998) all affirm the omnipotence of God; however, they do not hold to the nominalist tradition in theology, of which William of Occam was the most famous representative. He developed the distinction between God’s absolute power and his/her ordinate power. It is to this distinction that Calvin objected. Some nominalists took a more extreme view, God has the power to do logically contradictory thing as cited by Bavinck (1977:243): “God was able to sin, to go astray, to die, to be changed into a stone or an animal, to change bread into the body of Christ, to effect contradictions, to undo



the past, to make false what was true and true what was false. God is pure indifference or arbitrariness, absolute potency, without content: God is nothing but may become anything.”

This is how nominalist views the absolute power. God is in their view above the laws of rationality, truth and morality, free to act against them or change them as he/she wishes. Others like Schleiermacher and Strauss denied the absolute power of God and insisted that God’s power is limited to what God accomplishes. Berkhof (1981:80) repudiated the view of Schleiermacher and Strauss by asserting that:

In that sense we can speak of the *potentia absoluta*, or absolute power, of God. This position must be maintained over against those who, like Schleiermacher and Strauss, hold that God's power is limited to that which He actually accomplishes. But in our assertion of the absolute power of God it is necessary to guard against misconceptions. The Bible teaches us on the one hand that the power of God extends beyond that which is actually realized, Gen. 18:14; Jer. 32:27; Zech. 8:6; Matt. 3:9; 26:53. We cannot say, therefore, that what God does not bring to realization, is not possible for Him. But on the other hand it also indicates that there are many things which God cannot do. He can neither lie, sin, change, nor deny Himself, Num. 23:19; I Sam. 15:29; II Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:18; Jas. 1:13,17. There is no absolute power in Him that is divorced from his perfections, and in virtue of which he can do all kinds of things that are inherently contradictory.

Erickson (1994:302-303) states that there are certain qualifications to the all-powerful character of God, i.e. God is able to do all things that are proper objects of his/her power. These qualifications have been previously listed as the things God cannot do. Therefore, I define omnipotence as God who can do anything that is logically possible that is consistent with God’s other attributes.

### **Open Theist Understanding of Omnipotence**

Process theology, the father of open theism<sup>4</sup>, insists that God is limited in power. This system of thought in which God is portrayed as having something less than perfect power is the reasoning that open theists use to deal with the problem of evil. Within this view, one could speculate that although God is perfect and thus would prefer a world devoid of evil, it is not within his/her power to bring such a world about. Just as open theism robs God of his/her perfect knowledge, especially his/her infallible foreknowledge, so it subverts God’s almighty power. Thus Pinnock (2001:121) argues: “We must not define omnipotence as the power to determine everything but rather as the power that enables God to deal with any situation that arises.” The freedom of human beings restricts God’s power and the fulfilment of God’s plans for history depends on our choices. Therefore, in many particulars, the course of history is finally contingent upon human decisions rather than divine wisdom. Boyd (2000:97) articulates this position most clearly when he states that:

It might help if we think of God’s power and our say-so in terms of percentages. Before creation, God possessed 100 percent of all power. He possessed all the say-so there was. When the Trinity decided to express their love by bringing forth a creation, they invested each creature (angelic and human) with a certain percentage of their say-so. The say-so of the triune God was at this point no longer the only one that determined how things would go. God’s personal creations now possessed a measure

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<sup>4</sup> See Harold’s Phd for a historical analysis on the development of Open thesim.



of ability to influence what would occur. This was necessary (as was the risk that went with it) if God's creations were to be personal beings who could make authentic choices, including the choice whether to enter a loving relationship with him.

Open theists, in their redefining God's omnipotence, replace it with "omnicompetence". Ironically, Boyd, who decries the Calvinistic determinism as God creating pre-programmed automatons, is quite comfortable with God's figure as a chess master who is able by "omnicompetence" to outmanoeuvre opponents and so, despite setbacks along the way, finally checkmate God's adversaries and achieve goals. Boyd (2000:127-128) asserts the following:

God's perfect knowledge would allow him to anticipate every possible move and every possible combination of moves, together with every possible response which he might make to each of them, for every possible agent throughout history ... Isn't a God who perfectly anticipates and wisely responds to everything a free agent might do more intelligent than a God who simply knows what a free agent will do? Anticipating and responding to possibilities takes problem-solving intelligence. Simply possessing a crystal-ball vision of what's coming requires none.

Thus the assumption of the "omnicompetence" of God within open theism has the added feature of resourcefulness. Sanders (1998:162), in articulating his opinion on the omnicompetence of God states: "Sometimes the desires of God are stymied, but God is resourceful and faithfully works to bring good even out of evil situations." Therefore, since God is ingenious rather than sovereign, it will come as no surprise that open theism rejects the idea of God's will. There is no room in the open theistic version of God for his/her eternal, unchangeable, all-comprehensive counsel, in which he/she has eternally purposed what he/she will do in time

Sanders (1988: 88) clearly explains this approach:

God's activity does not unfold according to some heavenly blueprint whereby all goes according to plan. God is involved in a historical project, not an eternal plan. The project does not proceed in a smooth, monolithic way but takes surprising twists and turns because the divine-human relationship involves a genuine give-and-take dynamic for both humanity and God.

Open theist, therefore, believes in a God who is not in control of all things because he/she is restrained in his/her power. Thus, open theists understand the power of God to be that of "coercive" power which God uses very sparingly. Boyd (1994:45) responds to the question concerning coercive power by declaring that, subsequent to the creation of free moral agents, "God necessarily surrendered a degree of his power." According to Boyd (1994:46), this measure of unilateral divine condescension was necessitated by the Creator's desire to maintain the libertarian freedom of human beings created in his/her image. Due to this self-imposed restriction, God does not "always get his/her way". In this regard, God may be said to be both omnipotent and sovereign. God can fully place boundaries upon the exercise of divine power when it is necessary to safeguard the contra-causal freedom of human choices and actions. It is *utterly impossible* for God to always be in control yet allow free beings to exercise some control, as Boyd sees it.

Thus, to the extent that God 'lends' power away and thus God's power only becomes persuasive. In articulating this perspective Boyd calls for a redefinition of how Evangelicals understands God's sovereignty. In *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, Boyd (2001:44) states



that “some Christians use the word sovereignty as though it is synonymous with control” This loss of control thus limits the power of God to do that which God will to do. To delimit the will of God is to limit God’s power because God’s power is the outworking of God’s will. Boyd limits God’s power to human free will rather than God’s will. This strips God of his/her sovereignty and makes God dependent upon his/her own creatures. Boyd, therefore, must concede that God is not the only power in the universe that he/she has created. Not only does God have to rule with them in mind, but God may also even have to contend with them. Boyd, therefore, does not see God as a being who is completely in control and exercising exhaustive sovereignty because open theists believe that there is no single and all-determining divine will that controls all things. Boyd (2001:45) also claims that God shares power:

Despite the various claims made by some today that we must protect the sovereignty of God by emphasizing his absolute control over creation and denouncing the openness view, I submit that we ought to denounce the view that God exercises total control over everything, for a truly sovereign God is powerful enough to share power and face a partly open future.

Frame demonstrates that open theism denies that God has complete control over creation in his criticism of open theism. Frame (2001:112) states that open theism limits the power of God to espouse human libertarian freedom.

## Conclusion

It has been established from history that the early Church Fathers understood that God is the all-powerful Creator who preserves and governs everything in the universe. Therefore, it has been established that the open theistic interpretation of God’s power limits God to the direction of God’s creation. This perspective of God’s relationship with creation is not found in Scripture or the early church’s history. Within Evangelicalism, the term “omnipotence” is used to describe an all-powerful God’s ongoing relationship with creation. Accepting the biblical doctrine of omnipotence enables one to avoid common errors in thinking about God’s relationship with creation. The biblical teaching is not *deism* (which teaches that God created the world and then essentially abandoned it), or *pantheism* (which teaches that the creation does not have a real, distinct existence in itself, but is only part of God), but *providence* – which teaches that although God is actively related to and involved in the creation at each moment, creation is separate from God. Moreover, the biblical teaching does not demonstrate that events in creation are determined by *chance* (or randomness); nor are they determined by impersonal *fate* (or determinism), but by God, who is the personal yet infinitely powerful Creator and Lord. The open theistic perspective stands in stark contrast to this Orthodox and evangelical understanding of God’s power.

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